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ABSTRACT

The passage of Bill 1706 by the Oklahoma State Legislature is a major step toward building professional schools of education and a true profession. Through the specifications of this law, the total process is to be strengthened, since changes in teacher education are severely limited if done in a piecemeal fashion. There are five major points which address competency issues: (1) Admissions criteria for colleges of education will be strengthened by requiring a higher grade point average and by assessing competence in oral and written communication skills. (2) The quantity of clinical field experience will be increased and placed in settings which demonstrate first-rate educational practices. (3) The academic competence of teachers in their subject fields will be tested beginning in 1982 by required curriculum examinations. (4) A one-year internship or entry year is mandated, making teacher preparation a five-year process. At the end of the entry year, each beginning teacher is assessed by a three person committee, composed of a teacher, an administrator, and a teacher educator. (5) Continuing education activities will be planned by all boards of education, and participants rewarded in school system salary schedules. Colleges of education also come under this provision, in increased attention to faculty development. (FG)

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Oklahoma's Quest for Quality

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The passage of Bill 1706 by the Oklahoma Legislature is a turning point in the struggle to strengthen teacher education. If all its provisions are implemented, the preparation and competence levels of teachers will be greatly improved. In my judgment, 1706 is an exceptionally positive piece of legislation. It is a major step forward in the quest for quality.

While the bill is designed to raise teaching competencies, it approaches this goal in an encouraging manner. It provides a framework within which competence can be addressed, leaving to the profession how best to achieve higher standards of preparation. It is an omnibus bill and this is its strength. It makes possible the assessment of competency at a number of points in the preparation process, and that is another major strength.

I am an advocate of the legislation, hence this statement is admittedly biased. My bias is predicated on the belief that the quality of teacher preparation can and must be dramatically improved. It is also based on some pride in the accomplishment of colleagues in Oklahoma.

Bill 1706 in Perspective

At the national level, 1706 is the most positive teacher education legislation to thus far emerge. Its strength is in the fact that its authors viewed the preparation of teachers as a process. If we have learned anything about our calling, it is that changes in teacher education are severely limited if done piecemeal. Like any social system, each major component in teacher education needs to be modified if the total process is to be strengthened.

Bill 1706 offers such a context. Its provisions include: (a) increasing the standards of admission into colleges of education; (b) more clinical field work in the preparation process; (c) competency examinations in subject areas before graduation; (d) an entry year internship prior to certification; (e) the monitoring of the entry year teacher's performance by a team representing the profession; and, (f) provisions for the continuing education of teachers and teacher educators.

The Bill makes clear that the education of children and the demands of teaching are too important to be left to chance—and chance remains an essential characteristic of teacher education. It encourages educators to strengthen programs and provides a framework within which all concerned can take the preparation of teachers seriously.

In terms of Oklahoma's history, the newly mandated changes of 1706 are in keeping with the development of higher education in the State. The Oklahoma system of higher education has made possible access for many, and that is a major strength. Higher education in Oklahoma is at a point of transition, however. It is widely recognized that access is insufficient if the quality of educational experiences is not at or above national norms.

Many academic programs meet or exceed those norms and there is much to be proud of in Oklahoma's colleges. In respect to teacher preparation, most Oklahoma institutions meet national norms. Those national norms are fundamentally inadequate, however.

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Fortunately, demands for raising the quality of preparation are now widely voiced. Oklahoma, among a number of states, is beginning to address quality rather than quantity indicators in determining the success of its preparation programs. I believe Oklahoma is in the forefront of the movement, as it was in 1947 when it became one of the first states to mandate a bacheiors degree for all teachers.

Rigorous teacher education is a vital step toward strengthening all of public education. Teacher preparation is a vehicle by which issues of quality can be addressed in other aspects of education. Changes in teacher preparation will be reflected in the quality of education for children. There is no more direct way of improving the quality of schooling than by focusing on the preparation of educational personnel. Any lesser goal is unacceptable. Hence, Bill 1706 has implications far beyond the limited world of teacher education.

Let me comment briefly on the politics of the Bill's passage. Legislation of this magnitude called for very strong leadership by a cadre of legislators dedicated to the improvement of public education. Without that leadership, all the fragmented segments of public education could not possibly have agreed on the provisions of 1706. Because that leadership was vigorous, numerous hearings were conducted and opportunities for discussion and amendment were encouraged. Given the breadth of the bill, remarkably rapid progress was made during the law's gestation period.

A major political issue was the blending of the State's minimum salary schedule with mandates for the preparation of teachers. Legislators were under pressure to separate the salary question from the teacher education provisions. They took and held the position that they could not improve salaries unless they also assured the public the quality of teaching would be improved. For this reason, the education establishment had to agree that the average $1600 raise for teachers and the improvement of teacher education would be part of one piece of legislation. This is the way the matter ended despite repeated efforts to separate salary improvements from competency issues.

As already noted, competence goals need to be assessed at all points in the teacher education process. To make judgments at any one point or on any single criteria is professionally dishonest, and I do not apologize for the term. There are five major points in Bill 1706 at which competency issues can be addressed: at the point of admission, during clinical and field work activities, following curriculum examinations, at the end of the entry year or internship, and during continuing education provisions.

Admissions

The legislation specifies that a number of admissions criteria should be applied, including a higher GPA than has been the norm for generations. The State's Professional Standards Board will set the minimum GPA for admission to all teacher education institutions. Each program is permitted to introduce other criteria appropriate to their respective programs. Admission standards are seldom taken seriously in teacher education. Entering a college of education all too often simply means meeting a minimal grade point criterion and earning a set number of credits. A checkmark on a form is sufficient to initiate this clerical procedure. This process usually does not include careful assessments of academic potential, communication skills, prior experience with children, and other criteria. It is only when people are carefully reviewed on several dimensions, including an interview process, that professional judgments can be made as to the potential of persons for teaching. 1706 requires such a procedure and specifies that interview committees include a classroom teacher.

As the literature makes clear, considerable knowledge exists about appropriate criteria for admission. Regretfully, a form of "know-nothingism" permeates much of teacher education. The traditional wisdom states we cannot predict who will make a good teacher. This pontification is usually followed with an anecdotal illustration, i.e., "I once had a student who . . . " The truth of the matter is that: (1) valid criteria for admission exist, and (2) few teacher educators make the professional judgments required at the point of admission--or virtually any other point in the preparation process--that address questions of competence. The fragmented nature of most programs make the avoidance of responsibility relatively easy. I suspect legislators know this is the case and hence focused on raising admission standards.

In respect to the minimum GPA issue, most colleges of education have done a major disservice to public education by permitting the cut-off point to be at the "C" level. While most applicants are well above this mediocre norm, the message heard loud and clear is that teaching is not an academically respectable profession. We have created a situation whereby those with academic strengths are often advised away from colleges of education. Some argue low teaching salaries are the determining factor here, and low salaries are the major negative determents. I am convinced, however, that colleges of education carry the major burden for fueling this sad phenomenon. By and large, we have not consistently emphasized the need for a strong academic preparation for teaching. Instead, we have even developed a double standard whereby elementary teachers usually take fewer academic courses than secondary teachers--an intolerable admission of our lack of support for strong academic backgrounds for all teachers.

Bill 1706 further specifies that oral and written communications skills must be assessed. Anything done here must go beyond the requirement of a "passing grade" in a composition course. Teaching calls for a great deal of verbal interaction and this is a vital dimension of a person's potential for the role. Hence, competence in oral and written communication must be demonstrated.

Field Work

Bill 1706 specifies that pre-service field and clinical work must be increased. Colleges of education in Oklahoma and others nationally have greatly improved in this regard in recent years, but the Bill states that even more field work should be required.

The point here is that a major competence issue is often winked when we place persons in clinical settings. We know we need to make a careful assessment of the quality of field placements to which our students are sent, but that is not a common practice. Is the teacher with whom students are placed a competent person - a suitable model for newcomers? We beg this question by arguing we have large numbers of persons to place and that we must send students wherever we can gain entree.

We should never place students in any field placement unless teachers and administrators demonstrate first-rate educational practices, i.e., professional competence. For those who argue this goal is idealistic and fails to deal with reality, I would counter that a perpetuation of what we have been doing raises questions regarding our professional competence as teacher educators. If we do not stand for quality, quality will not be a characteristic of our profession. It really is as simple as that. The more demanding we become in respect to the quality of field placements, the greater our contributrion to the enhancement of public education.

Curriculum Examinations

Required curriculum examinations are a controversial part of Bill 1706. As has been demonstrated in other states, legislators believe the public should be protected from incompetent teachers. Bill 1706 specifies that no person can be licensed to teach by a college of education beginning in 1982 unless they have passed a curriculum examination in their subject fields. Dozens of such examinations are to be ready by the summer of 1981 and developing them is a tremendous task. The State Department of Education is responsible for the development and administration of the curriculum exams, as it is for most 1706 components.

The arguments against examinations of this type are well known, and I have some reservations. Nonetheless, I am an advocate of these particular examinations. They are another indication that entering the teaching profession is to be viewed as a serious act rather than a casual process. The public should be protected from academically incompetent persons and many are convinced that colleges of education have not contributed to that protection. Given our grading practices--which lead most campuses in the grade inflation race--such examinations are a vital part of the assessment process.

It will soon be possible to compare the academic competence of prospective teachers from program to program, and some fear such comparisons. These examinations also place the burden for academic preparation where it rightly belongs--on colleges of arts and scienes. The buck-passing on subject matter competence needs to end, and I see the curriculum examinations doing precisely that. I support these examinations because they reinforce the need for teachers well prepared in the academic sphere.

Entry Year Teachers

The entry year teacher concept, or internship, is the major breakthrough in Bill 1706. In effect, it escalates teacher preparation to a five-year process. On graduation from colleges of education, persons will receive a license which entitles them to seek a teaching position. The license is good for one year. During the first year of teaching, the entry year teacher will be assisted by a three-person committee consisting of a consulting teacher, the principal of the school, and a professor of teacher education.

This entry year committee is charged with assisting the newcomer and making the final recommendation as to whether persons should be certified at the end of the fifth year. These provisions establish an internship as the norm for entering the profession and challenge the "sink or swim" induction process.

The legislation takes from colleges the responsibility for making certification recommendations, which has also been the practice for generations. That responsibility will henceforth be far more in the hands of the profession--if the profession is defined as the membership of the entry year committee. Having a teacher, an administrator and a professor on each committee, in my view, reflects the heart of the teaching profession.

Since there may be well-over 2000 entry year committees in Oklahoma, the logistics of establishing these committees are formidable. It is estimated there are fewer than 600 teacher educators in the entire state. One can quickly determine that each teacher educator may need to serve on five or more of such committees. I would emphasize that these 600 teacher educators include not only college of education faculty, but also colleagues who teach methods courses or supervise in other university departments. This number also includes professors in schools of education who have washed their hands of the teacher preparation process for decades. There is no way that professors in

curriculum and instruction alone can respond to all the entry year committees that need to be implemented. All faculty members will need to participate, including deans. Happily, there are signs there may be financial help coming to schools of eduction as a result of this provision in the legislation. At this writing, $600,000 is earmarked for public teacher education programs by the 1981-82 Legislature. If approved, it will be a precedent setting allocation and hopefully will be increased a year hence.

Continuing Education

Equally controversial is the continuing education provision in 1706. The law requires that all boards of education form faculty development committees to plan continuing education activities for teachers beyond initial certification. The law specifies that continuing education should be rewarded in school system salary schedules. 1706 also makes clear that continuing education activities need not be restricted to academic course work. I support these provisions for they encourage educators to continually work at their craft with appropriate rewards for that commitment.

The bill also addresses the continuing education of professors of education. It specifies that all members of college of education faculties, including the dean, develop a five-year plan by which they demonstrate their activities with public education. Each college is to have a faculty development committee which must include a teacher representative. Faculty development plans may include a variety of approaches to working with the schools. The suggestion that has caught the most attention is that each five years professors spend one-half day per week for a semester teaching in a public school classroom. While the latter activity may not be appropriate for all profesors, the intent of the provision is clear. If most faculty members do not find a way to spend a week in a public school classroom each five years, the intent of the law will be violated.

Our Own Competence

The acceptance of higher competence norms has not been easy in our profession. Teacher education's track record is not positive when it comes to questions of quality and hard-headed assessment. Indeed, if any phrase characterizes teacher education, it is "once-over-lightly". The number of persons denied admission to schools of education, or who are cooled-out during the preparation process, or who are refused certification is remarkably low. In effect, once admitted a person is almost guaranteed to receive certification. Only the grossest incompetence is likely to cause removal from a program. These decisions are usually made at the point of student teaching rather than as the result of course work or other requirements. Student teaching is the only point of honest assessment in the preparation program and even there it is woefully inadequate. Virtually all other aspects have been ignored or "winked". The poorly articulated nature of most programs facilitates this disheartening phenomenon.

Do we have the fortitude needed as a profession to implement strong assessment standards? Our past performance suggests we do not. At the same time, criticisms and calls for reform are bringing about a situation in which it is becoming more and more difficult for us to hide. It is clear, therefore, that those who believe that teacher education can be rigorous and first-rate are beginning to press for fundamental changes.

One reason we have begged the competence question is because it turns the spotlight on ourselves. We cannot honestly deal with the competence of students without also focusing on our competence and on the competence of teachers and principals with whom our students are placed. These are threatening prospects, fraught with personal, professional and collegial repercussions. Given the web of subtle relationships that make

up any teacher education program, and the even more complicated web of relationships with public schools, we walk a delicate line of accomodation in every aspect of the preparation process.

It is no wonder we move slowly on the competence assessment question. For us to be forthright in addressing that question, we have to turn the mirror on ourselves. Not many are prepared to do that. This is as true in Oklahoma as in any other state. A growing number of teacher educators can do so, however, and therein lies hope for the profession.

Conclusion:

Lastly, I note a provision not in Bill 1706. To truly address the competence issue, we need to escalate the preparation process to a minimum of six years. The work of Robert Howsam, George Denemark, B.O. Smith and others point the ways open to us. I need not elaborate on their vision other than to unequivacably stand with them in the demand that teaching be raised from a semi to a full profession. Until we address that question, all other palliatives will continue to fall short of the mark.

Neither Oklahoma or any other state is yet at that point. We need to move toward that goal as rapidly as possible. Legislation like 1706 is a major step toward building professional schools of education and a true profession. Teacher education has come a long way in the past 100 years. Our calling is honorable and vital to the health of our democracy. We failed to become a rigorous profession during the salad days of the 50's and 60's. We now have a chance to build a rigorous preparation process. I am convinced we can do so in Oklahoma

These are busy and exciting days in Oklahoma with 1706 at the hub of most educational discussions. Teachers, administrators, professors, state department officials and others are grappling with the 1982 implementation of the bill. Changing traditions a century old is not easy. It will be some years before the bill begins to make a difference. There is no doubt, however, that the future for teaching is brighter in Oklahoma. Oklahomans now have a fighting chance to build a profession and to leave to history the four-year pattern of compromise that is the hallmark of the profession.

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